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The Tower and the Seven Stars: Archetypal Symbols in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Jibanananda Das

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Abstract

The poetry of Jibanananda Das shows a remarkable similarity with that of W.B. Yeats when one considers, apart from other thematic and aesthetic resemblances, the unique tendencies of both when it comes to the creation of archetypal symbols and the use of images. Regarding the creation of images and the power of imagination, Yeats signifies, through the power of imagination, the ancient and the Surreal; Jibanananda uses the same to explain 'kalpana-manisha' ('imaginative sensibility'). Both Yeats's and Jibanananda's affinity for symbols reveal a unique mobility in their respective poetical canons – one which distinctly contributes towards the ushering in of modernism in their own respective poetic traditions while imbibing possibilities of greater meaning and contextual expansion of the same by blending uniquely the traditional, the mythical and the familiar. This article shall, therefore, attempt a comparative study of Jibanananda and Yeats as regards their conception and treatment of archetypal symbols. Beginning with a short introduction which observes the similarities in the poetic deliberations of the two, this article will try to locate the poetic consciousness of Jibanananda as well as Yeats as regards their relationship with and renditions of symbolism. Finally, this article will examine the unique relationship of archetypal symbols with the poetic canons of Jibanananda and Yeats.

Keywords: W.B. Yeats, Jibanananda Das, Symbolism, Archetypes, 20th-century poetry

Introduction

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Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) was a Bengali poet, writer, novelist, and essayist in the Bengali language. He has emerged as one of the greatest Bengali poets after Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam in West Bengal and Bangladesh. A group of Bengali poets- Sudhindranath Dutt, Buddhadeva Bose, Amiya Chakraborty, and Bishnu Dey, who wrote between the 1930s and the 1950s were inspired by Western literary modernism and its various offshoots. Jibanananda Das, a lecturer in English, was the prominent of this group. He created a new poetic voice in Vernacular Literature where the natural beauty of the rural landscape of Bengal co-exists with his poetic sensibilities with the urban realities of the city of Kolkata. He affectionately addresses rural Bengal as 'Bengal, the Beautiful" and the city of Kolkata as "Kallolini Tillotama" (sonorous feminine beauty). His particular style of uneven rhythm, startling metaphors, and unique images have influenced generations of Bengali poets such as "the Krittibas" and "Hungry Generation" poets. His major volumes of poetry include Dhusar PandulipGrey Manuscripts, Bonolota Sen, Satti Tarar Timir (The Darkness of the Seven Stars), Mahaprithibi (The Wide World), and Bengal the Beautiful (Rupashi Bangla) (published Posthumously).

The poetic oeuvre of Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) and W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) make way for significant critical points of departure on careful consideration and comparison. While belonging to histories, cultures and literary-cultural movements that are arguably disparate (at least at the literal level, with Yeats being from Ireland and Jibanananda from Bengal), one is presented with striking similarities in the circumstances that both Yeats and Jibanananda faced in their career – early Romantic strains followed by significant stakes in the modernist cause, unique transmutative capabilities which combined the 'new' discourse of modernist poetry with native myths, legends and histories, and finally an intriguing affective relationships with one's homeland (with Yeats's Ireland as well as Jibanananda's Bengal going through tumultous blood-bathed phases). Jibanananda's poetry, on careful critical comparison with Yeats's, reveals remarkable resemblances in imagery, treatment of subject, and weaving of myths and legends into the 'unique' symbolic narratives that both came up with in their respective cases. Amongst similarities which include but are not limited to the above, the similar nature of their conception of archetypal symbols bears an interesting resonance that surpasses geographical distance and cultural constraints. It is this striking similarity which suppposedly causes Sujata Sinha to infer that their poetic visions appear to spring from an identical imaginative power (168).

Being a lecturer of English, Jibanananda might have been well versed in Yeats' poetry, as is perceived from *Dinlipi* – a fact that can help illuminate further the manner of influence in the domain of idea, theme, technique, and attitude in a literary context despite the fact that both poets write in different languages and against a different socio-economic backdrop, against which these observations or affinities, therefore, apply marginally, at best.

'Fertile Fields': Locating the Symbolistic Consciousness of Yeats and Jibanananda

Jibanananda in "Kabitar Katha" ("Of Poetry") mentions that in creation sometimes certain sounds are heard, certain hues are seen, a certain smell is detected, certain human conflict or great pain is experienced, such that it seems that these emotions were present and will remain present for eternity. These elements give rise to certain emotions which then become part of material life (20-21). This observation by Jibanananda can be compared to

Yeats's conception of poetry: "All sounds, all colors, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions or as I prefer to think, called down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions" (qtd. in Unterecker 51).

Yeats' 'precise emotion'and Jibanananda's 'hriday-er sanghati' ('solidarity of the heart') are two phrases that are keywords that shape their essential modernist consciousness of poetry. Sanjay Bhattacharya finds that Jibanananda's poems are tangible symbols of emotion and moods, symbols that are not confined to images or spirituality; they are rather Yeatsian in nature, being "emotional symbols" and "symbols that evoke ideas mingled with emotions" (46). According to Bhattacharya, the symbolism of Jibanananda finds an echo in his poem "Banalata Sen" where the poet finds beauty in the components of dreams of an ancient world (47). In 1901, Yeats observes, "Our minds and memories are part of a greater memory – "that this great mind and memory can be evoked by symbols" (qtd. in Unterecker 51).

There are hints of symbols in some of Jibanananda's early poems: "the moon in the fields of Kartik", a symbol of past sensations; "the fertile fields of Kartik", a symbol of love; and the "harvested barren fields of Kartik", a symbol of sorrow. His emergence as a Symbolist poet, however, only materializes with "Banalata Sen".

'Solitary Signatures': Uses of Archetypal Symbols by Yeats and Jibanananda

Both Yeats and Jibanananda, in fact, can be singled out within their respective creative scenarios by virtue of their extensive use of archetypal symbols: In Jibanananda's case, firmamental objects such as stars, the moon, and the sky sometimes transcend their traditional meanings and assume symbolic significance. In his poem "Nirjan Sakshar", the firmamental archetypes refer to the tranquility of life and the guiding force. The repeated archetypal phrase "akashe akashe" expresses a breadth and width that acts as a symbol for limitless Imagination. Archetypal images such as nakshatra (star), akash (sky) and andhakar (darkness) appear in the poem "Onek Akash". Ultimately, the very name of a region, Bangla, is transformed into an archetype as an iconic symbol for a landscape endowed with an aura of beauty. This is not a conventional image of beauty but a picture where owls, foxes and mice appear against Autumn's backdrop, all unique to Bengali poetry. In a remarkably similar fashion, Yeats transforms Byzantium into an archetypal symbol for a place of art and immortality. Yeats desired to "reclaim the past" (Barry 194), believing perhaps that the time and place for the realm of Byzantium could represent the Golden Age for humankind. History and myth are integrated by the application of metaphors as both poets treat the metaphor of journey through the passage of history in Jibanananda's "Banalata Sen" and Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium"; Jibanananda's references to Persia and Yeats's to Byzantium articulate a sense of wonder and eternal silence.

There is, however, a subtle difference in the symbols used by Yeats and Jibanananda: Yeats had an affinity for conventional symbols, the duck, the swan, and the season of Autumn, and Jibanananda uses these symbols well; the cat, the swan and ducks are conventional symbols, symbols of hope, mystery, regeneration and beauty; and they find a similar way with Jibanananda, too. However, Jibanananda uses symbols such as the frog, the owl and the vulture, not associating them with a conventional set of interpretations of horror and ill omen, but imparting to them a strange beauty that is unique to Bengali literature. The very landscape of

rural Bengal, a symbol of beauty for Jibanananda, is defamiliarized, it is always described in autumn and winter and not spring as was the convention among other poets like Tagore. The rural landscape is a complicated symbol in Jibanananda – it not only signifies beauty but a sense of foreboding and decay that has a unique association with beauty.

'In That Mist': Archetypal Symbolism and their Relations to the Respective Poetic Canons of Yeats and Jibanananda

The watermark which validates the unique relationship between the poetry of Yeats and Jibanananda is the fact a certain *mobility* which cause their imagery to first become symbols and then signals. The images in their poems, therefore, become such symbols which regulate the movement of the poem. Image and symbol cannot be separated. Ultimately, both poets enter a crisis in the darkness of this dream world and resort to contemporary reality. To make the poems more incisive, Yeats uses the "gray deer" and the "black pigs" ("The Wind among the Reeds") or the mythological unicorn ("Where There is Nothing"). Jibanananda uses the "playful deer" ("Harinera"). Dew, moreover, appears as a symbol of time in the poems of Jibanananda, the quintessentially Autumnal poet, might have been inspired by Yeats. In Yeats' "The Valley of the Black Pig" we see the following image of the dew:

> The dews drop slowly and dreams gather: unknown spears
> Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes… (1-2)

The image of the dew is also revisited in "Aedh Tells of the Perfect Beauty" and "He Gives His Beloved Certain Rhymes":

> And therefore my heart will bow, when dew
> Is dropping sleep, until God burn time,
> Before the unlabouring stars and you.
> ("Aedh Tells of the Perfect Beauty" 6-8)

The image of the dew goes on to find its own unique usage in Jibanananda's famous poem "Banalata Sen": "At the end of all the days, dusk comes like the sound of dew" (13, trans. Chaudhuri) and in "Kuri Bochhor Pore":

> Those golden kites — the dew has taken them prey
> If I should find you suddenly in that mist, after twenty years! (29-30, trans. Chaudhuri)

The images of the stars play an important role in enhancing the picturesque quality of the poems of both poets: Yeats makes frequent references to the stars in lines such as "And then I must scrub and bake, and sweep,/ Till stars are beginning to blink and peep" ("The Song of the Old Mother" 3-4) and "Until the axle break/ That keeps the stars in their round" ("He Hears the Cry of the Sedge" 4-5). Moreover, the poem "The Dawn" brings out both images of the moon and stars together: "The stars fade out where the moon comes" (8). As for Jibanananda, the seven stars in the title of *Saat-ti Tarar Timir* are almost certainly the stars of Ursa Major or the Big Dipper. In a letter to Tagore, Jibanananda, while discussing the concept of serenity, writes this note:

> I can observe a turbulent surge of sorrow or joy in some high-quality writing. Sometimes the poet yearns to embrace the Seven Stars of the heavens; at times he staggers, poison-infected, in the darkness of inferno. Whether it is poison and darkness or a fountain of celestial effulgence, I do not think serenity is manifest in either. (trans. and qtd. in Seely, *Doe in Heat* 488)

Nirendranath Chakravarti offers an interesting interpretation of the title *Saat-ti Tarar Timir*: the constellation Ursa Major, he points out, consists of seven stars that form a figure resembling that of a question mark. This note of interrogation is comprised by seven wise sages of Indian mythology, namely Marichi, Atri, Angirah, Pulaha, Pulastya, Kratu, and Vashishtha (qtd. in Seely, *Doe in Heat* 488-89). The stars appear as symbols in many poems of Jibanananda such as "Hawar Raat":

Last night was a night of deep winds – a night of countless stars.
Throughout the night
The expansive wind played around my mosquito-net –
. . .
Last night was such an amazing night!
All the dead stars woke up – there was no empty space in the sky.
. . .
The stars who had died in the sky's lap thousands of years ago,
They too came through the window bringing with them countless dead skies. (1-3, 11-12, 21-22, trans. Majumdar)

Yeats, a Symbolist in the modernist tradition, favoured the use of ancient symbols because of the multiple meanings such symbols evoke and because of their relationship with the Great Memory. It is not possible to isolate these themes from poem to poem, for each is an integral part of many poems, though one may be stressed more than the others. Yeats achieves this synthesis with a set of inseparable symbols such as river or water, the tower. stairs (ascending) and the sailors. These symbols might have different meanings for different poets but form a link between some poems of Yeats and Jibanananda. Let us study some such symbols and their significance. The river or water can also be a metaphor for the passage of time or the stages of human life (creek, roaring river, sea; or the crossing of the river Styx in Greek myths). Since rivers are often used as political borders or boundaries, crossing one may be seen as a "passing over" or a decision that cannot be taken back. Names of rivers are specifically common in Bengal while at the same time physically demarcating the Bengal delta. The rivers have a mythological significance as well. The river Ganges flows from north-central India through Bengal and then empties into the Bay of Bengal where Varuna, Hindu god of the sea, and his wife Varuni reside. As the Ganges enters East Bengal, she becomes known as the Padma. The Karnafuli, in the south-easternmost corner of Bengal, flows down from the Chittagong Hill Tracts also into the Bay of Bengal. In Jibanananda's "Laghu Muhurta", three beggars, symbolizing a historic consciousness, wish to go near the river; "right now they would go to the country which is called a bright river". The sea in Yeats' poems becomes the "bright river" in Jibanananda. Water itself, as Mircea Eliade points out, "always brings regeneration" (qtd. in Cirlot 52). Besides, it disintegrates and abolishes forms, as in Yeats' "The Stolen Child":

For he comes, the human child, To the waters and the wild With a faery, hand in hand,
From a world more full of weeping than he can understand. (50-53)

or in "Down by the Salley Gardens":

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand. (5-6)

Modern psychologists like Cirlot asks us to interpret water as representing "the Unconscious…the non-formal, dynamic, motivating, female side of the personality. The projection

of the mother-image into the waters endows them with various numinous properties characteristic of the mother" (51) It is also, he notes, identified with intuitive wisdom. The "mystic sense of fishing and the fisherman," as Cirlot describes it, is another important aspect of Yeats' symbolism. "Fishing," he explains, "amounts to extracting the unconscious elements from deep-lying sources—the 'elusive treasure1 of legend, or…wisdom" (51-52) Sea-boats and sailors, intrinsically connected to the very element of water, are recurrent themes in poems such as Jibanananda's "Nabik" and "Nabiki" where characters are lost at sea and can symbolize heaven or infinity where all souls are emptied into. The sea has sometimes been represented as the return to a type of spiritual, emotional or material rebirth. In "Nabik":

> The sailor has a sense of defeat as he gets up with a start And finds that instead of taking his post at the helm
> He has dozed off hoping that his ship at mid-sea
> Would take care of itself. (1-4, trans. Seely, *Doe in Heat* 505)

Yeats in "The Religion of a Sailor" echoes his predecessor romantic poet Shelley:

> A sea captain when he stands upon the bridge, or looks out from his deck-house, thinks much about God and the world. Away in the valley yonder among the corn and the poppies men may well forget all things except the warmth of the sun upon the face, and the kind shadow under the hedge; but he who journeys through storm and darkness must need to think and think. (qtd. in Unterecker 65)

Finally, in all their mysterious symbolic capacity, come the image of the tower and the winding stairs. In "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry", Yeats writes that "the tower…is, like the sea, rivers and caves a very ancient symbol"; it is, he explains, "the mind looking inward upon itself" (qtd. in Ure 47). It is, as Cirlot points out, the archetypal "symbol of ascent" and links heaven and earth (62). Jibanananda uses the symbol of the winding stairs in particular and stairs in general in his poem "Manusher Mrityu Hole":

> Those stairs wind up, nearly touching the blue;
> The stairs bathed in sunlight. (22-23, trans. Chaudhuri)

Associated with both the tower is the stairway or the act of ascending. Quoting Eliade, Cirlot writes that steps symbolize "breaking through the levels of existence to open up the way from one world to another, establishing a relationship between heaven, earth, and hell" (62-63) – a relationship characterizing uniquely the poetic journeys of both Jibanananda and Yeats and their finding their modernist way into a labyrinthine modern existence.

Conclusion

In *Doe in Heat*, Clinton B. Seely, while discussing the relationship of Jibanananda's poetry with that of Yeats, makes an important observation:

> Had Jibanananda read Yeats's "Byzantium", how much of it had he understood, and how had he understood it? The fires in Byzantium purge but do not burn. Byzantium is separated from "the flesh and blood reality of the 20th-century world" by a body of water, a sea. Is Jibanananda's fire of purgation? Is his river here once again the Baitarani, separating the present licking world from the past and the dead? (626)

Yeats in "Byzantium" searches, travels through the sea of human consciousness and ultimately finds Byzantium; Jibanananda crosses Malaya, Singhal and Vidarbha in "Banalata Sen" in search of the long-sought eponymous who also awaits and seeks. In their own

respective poetic journeys of the archetypal symbolic, both poets seem to articulate the unfulfilled, ever-moving soul which searches for fulfilment; it is here that the echo of Yeats in Jibanananda becomes unmistakable and hard to miss. This influence was life-long and, though Jibanananda does not acknowledge the legacy specifically, it does a great credit to Jibanananda that he gradually developed a unique poetic voice where, though the themes were similar, his treatment of the same themes and archetypal symbols was different and perfectly suited to the vernacular palate as well as to the poetic scenario of 20th-century Bengal in the greater as well as the modernist context.

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